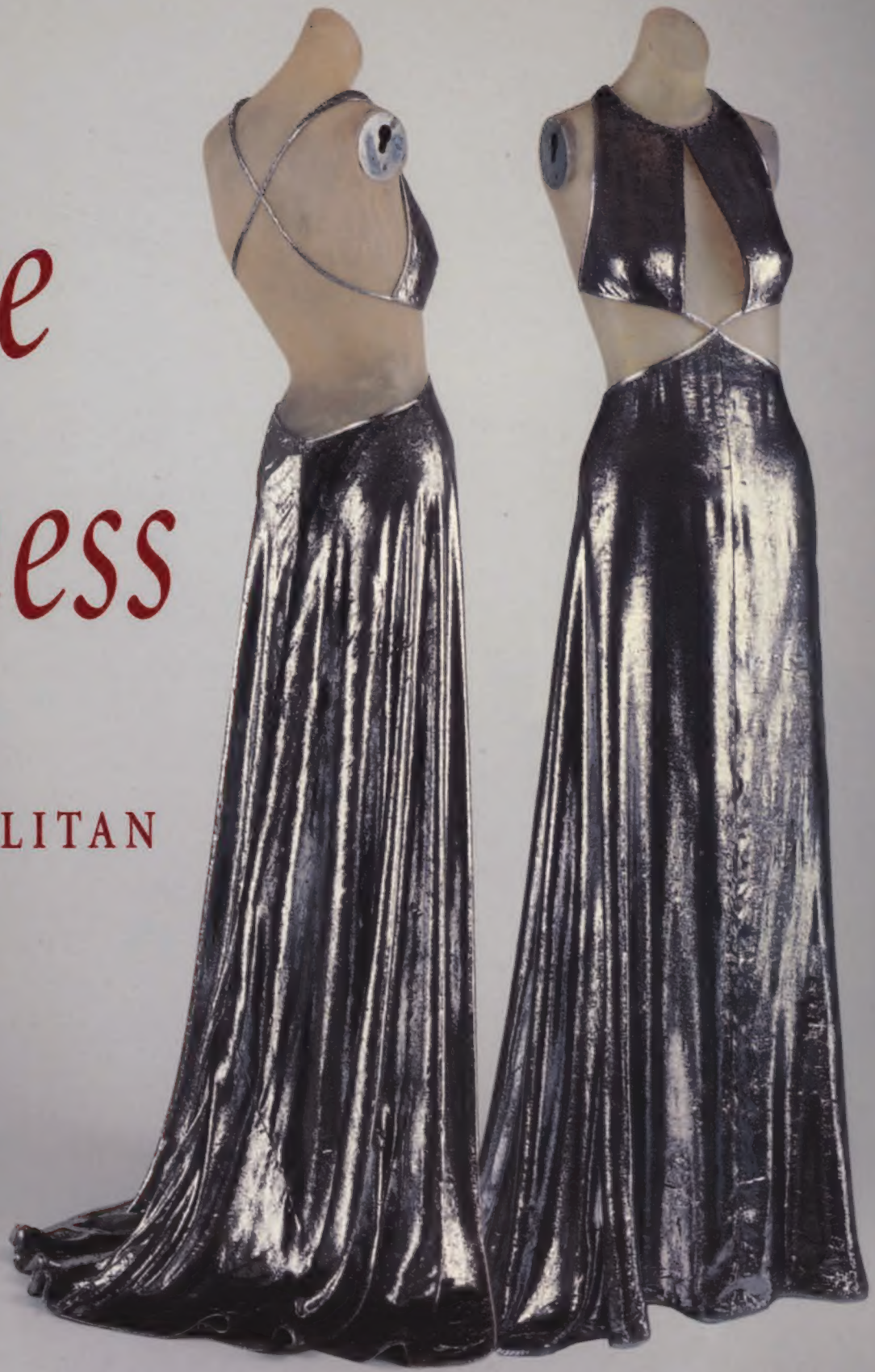
Bare Witness

THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART



"This is a backless age and there is no single smarter sunburn gesture than to have every low-backed costume cut on exactly the same lines, so that each one makes a perfect frame for a smooth brown back." British *Vogue*, July 1929 "Madame du V., a French lady, appeared in public in a dress entirely à la guillotine. That is to say . . . covered with a slight transparent gauze; the breasts entirely bare, as well as the arms up as high as the shoulders. . . ." *Gentleman's Magazine*, 1801 "Silk stockings made short skirts wearable." *Fortune*, January 1932 "In Defence of Sh**ld*rs" *Punch*, 1920s "Sweet hearting matches are very often made up at these parties. It's quite disgusting to a modest eye to see the way the young ladies dress to attract the notice of the gentlemen. They are nearly naked to the waist, only just a little bit of dress hanging on the shoulder, the breasts are quite exposed except a little bit coming up to hide the nipples." William Taylor, 1837 "The greatest provocation of lust comes from our apparel." Robert Burton, *Anatomy of Melancholy*, 1651 "The fashionable woman has long legs and aristocratic ankles but no knees. She has thin, veiled arms and fluttering hands but no elbows." Kennedy Fraser, *The Fashionable Mind*, 1981 "A lady's leg is a dangerous sight, in whatever colour it appears; but, when it is enclosed in white, it makes an irresistible attack upon us." *The Universal Spectator*, 1737 " 'Miladi' very handsome woman, but she and all the women were décolletées in a beastly fashion—damn the aristocratic standard of fashion; nothing will ever make me think it right or decent that I should see a lady's armpit flesh-folds when I am speaking to her." Georges Du Maurier, 1862 "I would need the pen of Carlyle to describe adequately the sensation caused by the young lady who first trod the streets of New York in a skirt . . . that was actually three inches from the ground." Henry Collins Brown, 1896 "In olden days, a glimpse of stocking was looked on as something shocking, but now, heaven knows, anything goes." Cole Porter, *Anything Goes*, 1934 "She [Josephine Baker] was wearing a marvelous little black skirt and a little Vionnet shirt—no sleeves, no back, no front, just crossed bars on the bias." Diana Vreeland, 1960s "This is a backless age and there is no single smarter sunburn gesture than to have every low-backed costume cut on exactly the same lines, so that each one makes a perfect frame for a smooth brown back." British *Vogue*, July 1929 "Madame du V., a

Bare Witness

by
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and
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The Metropolitan Museum of Art

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Front cover: Geoffrey Beene. Evening gown (back and front), fall/winter, 1995-96. Silver panne velvet. Courtesy Geoffrey Beene
Having abandoned medical school for fashion design, Beene employs fashion as a knowing dissection and articulation of the body. Signature Beene gestures include body-aware whetted surgical cuts, piped bands and luxurious finishes that touch the body, and a harness torso, basic yet elegant.

Back cover: Valentina. Evening gown, late 1930s. Red silk crepe. Gift of Igor Kamlukin, 1995 (1995.245.1)
In the epoch of exposure of the back, Valentina has ingeniously created a covered-up look with a single surprise, an adroit erotic charge at center front. Using slicing and suturing at that spot, Valentina gives drama to a dress that is otherwise monastic.

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Introduction

FASHION describes, articulates, and makes metaphors of the human body. Inexorably, fashion is a window through which we perceive the body as constructed from a reconciliation between the impulse to modesty and the desire to express oneself through one's physical presence. Specifically, fashion opens windows to the body that frame and define the whole and its parts. *Bare Witness* strives to see fashion's practice of covering and uncovering, concealing and revealing, which is a dynamic of dress and a delight for spectatorship.

The revelation and concealment of the body are functions of both the social contract of fashion and individual self-confidence. Decisions regarding apertures to the body may be contingent on the imputed desires and ideals of the spectator. Yet such decisions are also fixed in the psyche and self-confidence of the wearer. Thus, dress is both self-expression and negotiation.

Psychologist J. C. Flügel's theory in *The Psychology of Clothes* (1930) that erogenous zones keep shifting proposes that fashion is animated by a requirement for a primary exposure in clothing that is continually evolving in accordance with the eye's exhaustion with one vista and its periodic need to be replaced by another view to stimulate erogeny. To be sure, erotics play a significant role in dress, but this impulse is only one of many social and personal imperatives affected in fashion. Desire's wanderings, however important, can only be explained in complement to power, self-esteem and self-imaging, and the cultural covenants of clothing.

Customarily, we take the body to be an integer, a primary unit, as in the concept of one person, one vote. (Of course, when we describe the body politic, we are allowing the body to become a collective.) Yet we know this primary element to be further divisible into and distinguishable in its parts, even if those parts cannot possess life independent of the complex mechanism of the complete body. Anatomy, self-reflection, and people-watching afford us the incontrovertible truth of the complication of the human body and our capacity to distinguish its incorporated elements. Anthropologists and behaviorists, such as Desmond Morris, have identified notably the expansive human potential for being fascinated with body parts, including some of negligible importance in Western dress.

Correspondingly, fashion is a mosaic, often heterogeneous in its constituents. Western dress has repeatedly imposed an exoskeleton on the body in order to establish the three-dimensional edifice of appearance as an artificial case that surrounds, but is not identical to, the physical body inside. Yet even the constructed body and the body as construct are susceptible to the possibility of margins or apertures that permit the viewer to gaze at the body within.

Our attempt in *Bare Witness* is to document selected observations of the body in conjunction with the history of Western dress. These are assembled according to the bodily zones of décolletage, back and derriere, ankle and leg, and midriff. In these sectors of the body, fashion has vested our interest in apparel, our changing perception of modesty, and vanishing points between erotic and rational

"Jeune Bourgeoise vêtue d'une Polonoise...," from *Galerie des Modes et Costumes Français Dessinés D'Après Nature 1778-1787*. Irene Lewisohn Costume Reference Library, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Alexander Liberman

Carl Vernet. "Les Chevaliers Gentils," from *Le Bon Genre,* no. 48, 1811. Irene Lewisohn Costume Reference Library, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Aline Bernstein

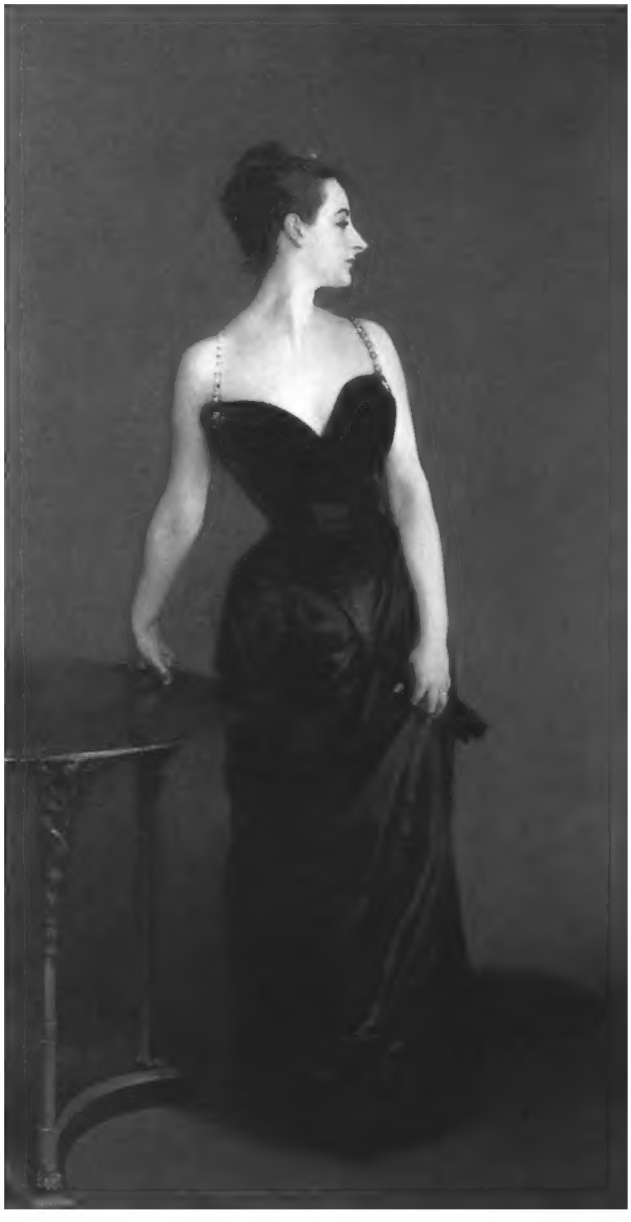
perspective. Further, we address the issues of veiling and transparency.

Traditionally, the bust has been a location on the female body granted a great deal of attention as an expression of body extension and as a secondary sexual characteristic distinctive to the gender. Yet neither decorum nor eroticism has fixed the place or the ideal of the bust, which through time has varied in scale, shape, and visibility. Even when encased in fabric, the bust is flexible enough to be presented diversely as apparel. When the perimeter of apparel and exposure comes close to the bust, opening a plateau of flesh to upper chest and neck (though neck accessories and necklaces have traditionally covered the neck, seen as its own vulnerable zone), the bust assumes such variable roles as nurture, ductile flesh, sexuality, and pleasure. In his romance *Rosalynde* (1590), English poet and dramatist Thomas Lodge called breasts "orbs of heavenly frame." The bosom's more mundane frame is attested to in clothing. In the eighteenth century, the body was subject to its representation in dress, extending hips by panniers, diminishing the waist through a corset, and setting a pedestal for the bust in a carapace of the lower chest. Skin was highlighted in a trapezoid of the body surmounting this construction of dress. If the solid forms of dress prevailed below, the precinct of the bust was made even softer and more vulnerable by laces and sheer mull fichus, obscuring the body and perhaps tempering the rim between flesh and dress. As liberties began to assert themselves in many forms in the late eighteenth century, the bust was distinctly revealed amidst the delicate finials of linen. Participants in Rococo games of love could play with the peekaboo appearance of the bare breast. Concommitantly, the new styles of the last quarter of the eighteenth century also exposed ankles. That this era of freedom fostered a liberty of the body at both ankle and

bust may suggest that the motivating principles are political as much as erotic. Later, in 1831, French painter Eugène Delacroix would depict Liberty as a bare-breasted woman.

In Liberty's new age, ancient ideals of democracy and the relaxed ideal of new dress merged in the Empire style. The ponderous mass of earlier apparel was supplanted by light cotton, grazing the natural body and flickeringly revealing it. The Empire called attention to the bust in concert with the waist, which was raised to a level just under the bust. This zone of coupled bust and waist is the single horizontal element in the style, permitting the dress to fall below that region in an unimpeded vertical to the ground. The sheerness of an Empire dress did not allow for lateral expansion.

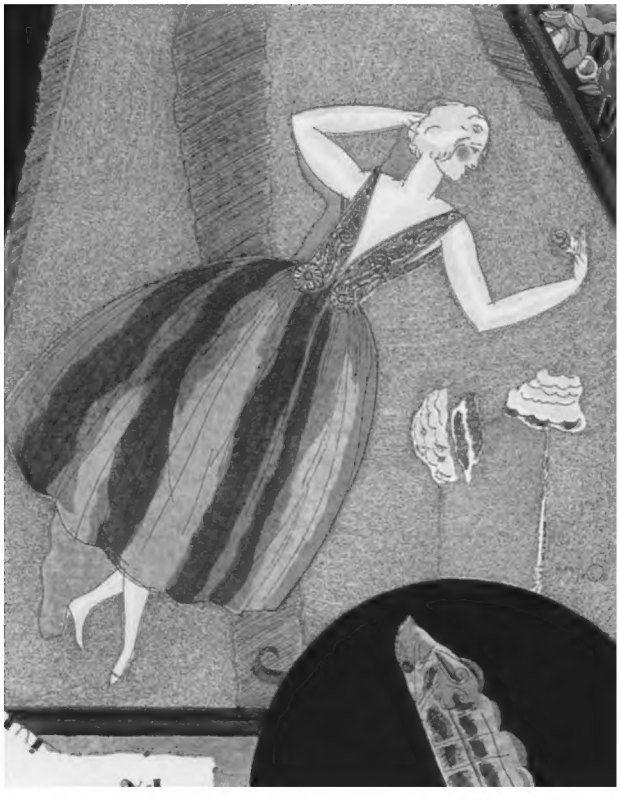
As dresses of the 1820s spread out in volume, the bust was redefined appropriately, with respect for a principle of harmonic proportions. The lateral augmentation of ballooning skirts was accompanied by widened and rising necklines that touch the shoulder. While the configuration of the neckline had become higher on the bust and broader to the point of the shoulders, the quantity of skin revealed was little changed. In the 1850s and 1860s, lateral expansion achieved its zenith; crinolines afforded light support for massive skirts and for the wide expanse of upper chest visible above the bust, a breadth which now extended even off the shoulders. These off-the-shoulder necklines were the engineering legerdemain of the new couturiers, such as Charles Frederick Worth and Emile Pingat, who managed to attach vestigial sleeve caps to the structured bodices to connect arm and trunk, while still allowing the shoulders to be completely bare. Following this apogee in the 1850s and 1860s, apparel tended for the remainder of the century toward a more demure view of the corsage. Any aberrations of the late-nineteenth-century era tended to vacillate between a narrow V or a reversion to the bared-shoulder ideal of the 1850s. In John Singer Sargent's tantalizing portrait *Madame X* (1883-84), the body is fully uncovered above the bust through the shoulders and arms. Functioning even with the shoulder straps as a dalliance between pearly body and dark dress, the gown in the Sargent portrait epitomizes the



John Singer Sargent. *Madame X (Madame Pierre Gautreau)*, 1883-84. Oil on canvas. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Purchase, Arthur Hoppock Hearn Fund, 1916 (16.53)

abiding fascination of the century with exposed shoulders.

In the years from 1910 through World War I, the softening of the fashion silhouette encouraged the loosely slung neckline to droop to an expanse of *poitrine*, now a deep trough to the lower, unsupported bust. Lacking the armature of a fabricated and reinforced trunk, the bust fell naturally with a corresponding suspension of the soft fabric in proximity. In such a case, the three-dimensionality of the bust corresponded to its conception in the uses of cloth on the body. After this dip of the *poitrine* in the 1910s, the bust was de-emphasized, even flattened, through the 1920s and 1930s, allowing an open, but generally unrevealing, center-front drop with a more dramatic plunge at the back.



Mario Simon. "Mirage: Robe du soir, de Paul Poiret," from *Gazette du Bon Genre,* no. 4, May, 1920. Irene Lewisohn Costume Reference Library, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Ethel Frankau

In the later 1930s, probably beginning with Mainbocher's representative synthesis of the discreet and the dramatic, technology and audacity created the strapless gown, in a manner to be codified in Christian Dior's New Look influence of 1947 and after. From the initiative of Mainbocher and the icon of Dior, fashion in the late 1940s and 1950s sought an ideal of the young woman with skin exposed in strapless dresses and gowns with plunging necklines. Evening wear led the style, though indubitably American sportswear and European and American swimwear (including the explosive bikini swimsuit of 1946) corroborated the new delight in exposure. The strapless dress was contingent upon its own calculated infrastructure, the built-in or added corsetting-and-stays shaping of the dress, to which the wired brassiere was merely the summit.

More than two hundred years of subtle moves in décolletage were rendered flagrant and ironic in Rudi Gernreich's Pop-Art Topless bathing suit (1964). In the same year, Cole of California presented its Scandal Suit swimwear with plunging stretch mesh cleavage. Provocation may have been an objective of these swimsuits, but they fitted either conceptually (Gernreich) or practically (Cole) with the tenor of the athletic, body-controlling women who were emerging from traditional femininity as enforced by the New Look to what would soon be bra-burning actions of empowerment. In its impracticality, Gernreich's gesture fulfilled scant desire for wearers and only rendered the bust naked, not articulated, for voyeurs. In its December 1, 1967 cover story on Gernreich, *Time* reported that his topless swimsuit, which sold 3,000 pieces, was inspired by women removing their tops to sunbathe on European beaches. Florentine designer Emilio Pucci was predicting toplessness and body cosmetics at the same time. "To get the drop on him [Pucci]," *Time* remembered, "Gernreich whipped up

a prototype topless for *Look*. To his considerable surprise, half a dozen stores asked to carry them." Through the later 1960s and 1970s, waves of body liberation were even more important than the swells of the sea in inviting fashion designers to experiment with nudity. A synergy between the new and blatant eroticism and the fresh self-confidence of women inspired them to be clients for significant experiments related to the braless bust. Transparency, for example, was most forcefully explored by Yves Saint Laurent and André Courrèges.

In the 1970s, as designers began using the bust without a brassiere or any other structured support for the breasts, necklines plunged in front (as they had in the 1910s and 1950s). Halston's creation of soigné evening wear with bare halters, along with the inspiration of swimwear, freed the body for dramatic drops almost to the navel.

Diana of Ephesus, goddess of fertility, possessed no greater quantity or fabrication of breasts than those constructed in the history of fashion. Symbolic, actual, and erotic, the bust inevitably plays a significant and mutable role in costume history. Perhaps we, as a culture, will never, as James Joyce directed in *Chamber Music* (1907), "unzone thy girlish bosom," because the bust is ever a zone of fashion's insight and imagination.

Any witness observes and any mirror reveals the front. The back might remain a secret, or might, perhaps, be perceived only incompletely or intermittently. Further, a person whose back and derriere are being looked at may have no knowledge that the body is being witnessed. The back literally avoids confrontation, yet it may no less (and perhaps even more) invite the gaze. Somatic psychologists might doubt the back's role as an erotic sign, but the spine's unerring course from neck to buttocks is an erotically charged path. Moreover, the metaphoric quintessence of the spine is character and identity,

Baron Adolf de Meyer. *Rita de Acosta Lydig*, ca. 1913. Photograph. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Mercedes de Acosta, 1968 (68.615)

making it a critical exposure suggesting both vulnerability and magnetism. At mid-nineteenth century, the back inevitably was exposed along with shoulders by Second Empire beauties and in the cultivated arcs and curves of Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres's attenuated nudes. But in the twentieth century, the exposed back became an instrument of female power. Edwardian swagger portraiture began to rotate around women of power with beguiling mobility. More than any other woman in America, Rita de Acosta Lydig used the bared back as a stylish strategy. Baron de Meyer's 1913 photograph of the legendary beauty, published in *Vogue*, gets its impact from the seductive but aware *Rückenfigur* point of view. A famous fashion and celebrity story relates that Giacomo Puccini, when in New York for the

premiere of his opera *The Girl of the Golden West*, was seated in the box of the dowager who had supported the production. Upon seeing Lydig arrive in her loge box and remove her wrap to disclose a plunging back, the composer moved to seat himself in continuous view of Lydig's stunning bareness.

In the 1930s, fashion designers Augustabernard in Paris and Valentina in New York led in fashion's direction toward the bared back. The realization that a back bared below the equivalent of the apex of the bust meant the absence of a brassiere endowed this view with a racy intimacy. This encouraged not only the looks directed at women at the newly informal cocktail parties of the time but also the glamour photographers and stars of Hollywood, for whom the low-back dress became a paradigm of nonchalant allure. In the same era, swimwear appropriate for women who were not merely bathing but swimming required crab-backs and deeply carved backs. Decades later, film stars of the 1950s and 1960s, including Marilyn Monroe, Elizabeth Taylor, and Brigitte Bardot, were known for wearing dresses with bared backs. Fashion in the 1960s and 1970s continued to expose more of the front, and so, too, did it follow Paul Verlaine's pilgrimage to what the nineteenth-century poet extolled as "resplendent, glorious buttocks." In the 1990s, fashion designers as diverse as Thierry Mugler, Isaac Mizrahi, Gianni Versace, Ann Demeulemeester, and Alexander McQueen have pursued the provocative passage of the spine to touch or expose the still-remaining taboo of the rump.

The body possesses two extremes. The head is associated in every culture with mind, authority, and sacred nexus. The foot is the terrestrial extreme, connecting the body to the ground and gravity's actuality. Western fashion, in its propensity for enveloping shape, often subordinated the foot as an undesirable extremity or as an extreme taboo. Feet, still all but invisible in the slow-moving protocols of eighteenth-century court life, came into view in the last quarter of the eighteenth century, permitting walking as espoused by Jean Jacques Rousseau and facilitating the mobility necessary for more active lives. Foot and ankle were a newly visible zone in those nimble, body-revealing times of political upheaval. Day dress in particular was being gathered, tucked into pockets, and displaced above the ankle to give license to the feet of women akin to a kind that man had long enjoyed. Women in the 1770s moved at a brisker pace and with visible ankles.

By the Directoire, the dress had descended again, with brief exceptions, to the floor. Such concealment of the foot promoted its erotic role in refrain of the desire of eighteenth-century swains, inspired by Casanova, to observe women tumble over in their cumbersome court dress as their singular opportunity to see ankle and foot. The 1820s and 1830s witnessed the rapid elevation of the hem to above the ankle, although a precipitous drop in skirt lengths rendered foot and ankle shrouded and secret again by the beginning of the Victorian era.

In the 1880s, in fashionable attire, feet emerged briefly from their more than forty years of hiding. The activities of women, such as walking and croquet, mandated the new freedom offered by the exposed ankle in mid-1880s versions of the Dolly Varden dress. By the time of World War I, women's dress was customarily cut just above the ankle, and Mariano Fortuny's Delphos gown that covered the feet and pooled on the ground was an anomaly for modern dress. In the 1920s, change was rapid as hemlines ascended, offering an unprecedented sight of women's legs in public. By the mid-1920s, dresses were cut just below the knee, and the knee itself could be seen in performance of lively new dances like the tango and Charleston and when a woman was seated. The site of the hem is important in its

static form but equally portentous in its active migration along the leg, caused by the motility of modern life. Shorter skirts were the province of presumptive male spectatorship and delight, but they were also the manifestation of women's vigor and power and of their assumption of some traditionally male prerogatives.

To some, twentieth-century fashion is like a thermometer of rising and falling hems. Little can be inferred from the site or sight of the hem, given the many elements of expression engaged in clothing. Yet in the 1960s, another pivotal decade for women, dress length and leg exposure became both *le dernier cri* and a *cri de coeur* for women of values. In those years of critical social change, fashion issued its last mandates of skirt length to increasingly independent and self-defining women. In 1965, both Mary Quant in England and André Courrèges in France showed miniskirts two-to-three inches above the knee, a brevity then scandalous but soon to be modest. Quant's version was ready-to-wear and was associated with "street"—or observed—style and tempestuous Disestablishment England, while Courrèges's version was offered in the sovereign category of haute couture as an accommodation to youthful and media-blasted novelty and avant-gardism. A year later, miniskirts were pandemic, even as they were denounced from pulpits and decried by fashion traditionalists. Their extremism was rapidly eclipsed by the farther heights of micro-miniskirts and the hot pants that, in a few threads of juncture, provided short trousers at their smallest. As James Brady would later remember of 1969, "Within a few years skirts had gone as high as they could architecturally go—any higher and they would cease to be skirts and become blouses." Thus, Brady explained that year's dramatic descent to the maxi. Sovereign fashion, dictating style throughout culture, ended with these decrees of the skirt length and leg exposure from micromini through maxi. Long skirts with slits, pants cigarette thin or pajama fluid, and skirt lengths short, long, and in-between became continuing options beginning in the 1970s.

Fashion historian Robert Riley described his personal memory of visiting Paris as a young man in the early 1930s and seeing women of style wearing dresses cut on the bias and so clinging that he could discern the region of the navel through the dress. In such an era, dress never disclosed the navel, but offered the temptation of its presence and, on rare occasion, opened up a window to the proximate zone above the navel suggesting its special body concavity. Through history, Far Eastern, African, and Near Eastern wrappings have afforded views to the midriff that the West had declined until the 1930s. Bare midriffs arose in Western dress in that decade as fashion designers Madeleine Vionnet and Alix Grès assimilated the exoticism of theatrical costume and non-Western dress into their work. In the zealously exotic and body-conscious years of the late 1960s and early 1970s, fashion at all levels returned to the midriff as a sector for exposure, deliberately creating a window through clothing to midriff and even to the navel. Moreover, while the West has long known that the body veiled is more appealing than the body wholly revealed or concealed, examples in exotic costume renewed and expanded the twentieth-century options to mask and veil the body through drapery's soft shields.

Bare Witness thus posits metaphors of windows and draperies. Of course, we do not build a house in raiment. Yet we do make, through clothing, a sheltering personal security akin to the domestic and a planned, deliberate, constructed body for the conduct of living and the social contract. *Bare Witness* is ultimately bearing witness, testifying to the body physical and metaphysical.

◀ *French*
Robe à l'anglaise, 1785-87
Pink and white striped silk taffeta
Purchase, Irene Lewisohn Bequest, 1966 (CI 66.39ab)

Detail
French
Robe à l'anglaise, 1785-87

In eighteenth-century dress, the torso was encased by layers of quilted linen and boning that constitute an exaggerated exoskeleton. An inevitable consequence of redefining the shaping of the torso is emphasis on the hipline and bustline. By mid-century, especially in France, the style was for the bust, veiled by lace or a sheer mull fichu, to emerge above the top line of the bodice.

◀ *Left:*
French
Evening dress, ca. 1817
Gold-tinsel-embroidered white mull
Gift of Mrs. Langdon Marvin, 1976 (1976.137.1)
Right:
American
Dress, ca. 1804-10
White-sprig-embroidered white muslin
Gift of Russell Hunter, 1959 (CI 59.35.1)

Detail
French
Evening dress, ca. 1817

In the Empire period, attention migrated to the bust as the waistline rose to under-bust level. The body was conceived of as a graceful neoclassical column like that of contemporary architecture, with articulation at the bust equivalent to a capital. Sheer textiles affording some transparency suggest the natural body beneath.

French
Ball gown, late 1850s
Light-blue and white silk damask
Gift of Mrs. Frederick van Beuren Joy, 1983
(1983.479.1a-c)

▶ *Detail*
French
Ball gown, late 1850s

In the middle of the nineteenth century, even at the point when an extreme modesty reigned, with layers of fabric enveloping the form, evening bodices were extraordinarily revealing. Bodices buttressed by boning allowed the neckline and sleeves to be suspended across the shoulders and to hover low on the corsage and back.

◀ *French*
Presentation gown (worn on the occasion of the coronation of George V), 1911
Silver silk damask with rhinestone and gold-thread embroidery
Gift of Mrs. C. Phillip Miller, 1957
(CI 57.17.3)

The teens silhouette is a revival of the Directoire and Empire styles, but here it is blended with a turn-of-the-century monobosom. Once again, a new shape was founded in reference to past style. The revealing neckline conforms to an unsupported bust, creating a soft, languorous silhouette.

▶ *Christian Dior by Yves Saint Laurent*
Late-day dress, spring/summer 1959
Black, red, and magenta silk taffeta chiné
Gift of Joyce von Bothmer, 1976
(1976.117.4)

Sustaining the New Look's strong silhouette of traditional form, made possible by the reintroduction of the carapace-like infrastructure of nineteenth-century dressmaking, Dior by Saint Laurent employs a portrait neckline. Using the inner edifice of the dress, the designer does not have to anchor the shoulders, and he lets the sleeves festoon like a stole.

◀ *Left:*
Rudi Gernreich
Topless evening gown, spring 1970
Black wool knit
Gift of Rudi Gernreich Revocable Trust, 1985
(1985.374.12)
Right:
Rudi Gernreich
Topless bathing suit, 1964
Elasticized black wool knit
Gift of Betty Furness, 1986 (1986.517.13)

The two critical and most expansive clothing categories for body exposure over the past hundred years have been evening wear and swimwear. Swimwear always extends the possibility of a view to the body. Gernreich's paradox is that the bottom of the topless suit is a conservative form in the same wool material that had been used for Victorian bathing apparel.

▶ *Halston*
Evening jumpsuit, 1974
Red bugle-beaded silk chiffon
Gift of Jane Holzer, 1993 (1993.517.19)

Halston employs a halter neckline that had begun to create an exposed back in late 1930s sportswear and evening wear. Yet, in the thirties, the bare back was the verso of a demure front. Only in 1950s sportswear did a plunging neckline in the front coincide with a nude back. Halston has borrowed from the same sportswear tradition of the thirties by appropriating pajama pants.

◀ *Mme Blanchard, Paris*
Summer promenade dress, ca. 1883
Pink, white, and green rose-printed blue cotton sateen
Gift of Estate of Mrs. Robert B. Noyes, 1943 (CI 43.7.4ab)

Like the late-eighteenth-century promenade dresses *à la polonaise*, which hovered at the ankle and ballooned at sides and back, the style of the 1880s was to create volumes of form around the body while freeing the ankle and foot. The 1880s style was influenced by the new sports clothing of the time, especially walking and croquet dresses.

▶ *Nellie Harrington for Corbeau et Cie, New York*
Day ensemble, 1928
Bois de rose silk georgette with dyed fox
Gift of Mrs. Sidney Bernard, 1956 (CI 56.33.12a-c)

In the 1920s, the lower leg was exposed, creating the possibility that the knee might be seen when moving or sitting. This was the first time in the history of modern Western dress that the full calf was seen and the knee could be glimpsed. Of course, this length permitted and even enhanced the dances of the era, especially the tango and Charleston.

◀ *French*
Dress, 1827-28
White muslin with organdy and lace trim
Purchase, Irene Lewisohn Bequest, 1968
(CI 68.68.3)

After the body consciousness and transparent fabrics of the Empire, there was a move toward fabrics with more weight, and the silhouette began to balloon away from the legs. There was a less defined lower body, and the hemline crawled upward, arrested above the ankle. The ankle as a visible extremity constituted an erotic frontier, while the silhouette otherwise assumed mass and modesty.

▶ *American*
Summer dress, 1917-18
White cotton organdy with self ruffles and threaded blue trim
Gift of Deedee Moore, 1979 (1979.248.3)

During the period of World War I, romantic dressing obtained; full skirts hovered above the ankle and waistlines dropped. As there was less structure to the modern silhouette, the historical evolution was recapitulated from Empire to Romantic Revival, from focus on the bust to attention to a revealed ankle and leg.

Mary Quant
Minidress, 1966
Purple wool jersey with orange and white wool jersey band trim
Gift of Maxime McKendry, 1969 (CI 69.10.1)

The hiking up of the length to two inches above the knee that characterizes the minidress was unprecedented and provocative in its day. Now it looks moderate, but then it was the first time the hem of the skirt was above what Chanel called the most unattractive part of the woman's body, the knee. Quant's street-inspired minidress was immediately complemented by a similar length in haute couture by André Courrèges.

Left:
Thurmand Hedgepeth III
Hot pants, 1970
Brown leather with red and black snakeskin appliqués
Gift of Frederica T. Harlow, 1982 (1982.417)
Right:
Serendipity
Micromini skirt (worn by Cher [Bono]), 1969-70
Recycled denim jeans
Gift of Serendipity 3 Denim Clothing Collection, 1977 (1977.333.52)

The micromini became so short that hot pants were the only logical evolution that could afford any structure or closure. Ironically, the pants that had been associated with menswear's decorum became synonymous with womenswear's striving for exposure.

Duval and Egan, New York
Evening gown, ca. 1890
Yellow silk satin, ivory silk net with gilt metal, rhinestone and white silk-floss embroidery
Gift of Mrs. Clara Belle Walsh, 1945
(CI 45.50.1ab)

Much of nineteenth-century romance is about the nape of the neck and the upper back. With the firm bustle of the 1880s, the paradigm of dress was increasingly oriented to trailing lengths of skirt and train. This posterior emphasis resulted in a rear, as well as anterior, lowering of the neckline.

Left:
Valentina
Evening gown, ca. 1935
Pale-gray silk ottoman
Gift of Igor Kamlukin, 1995 (1995.245.5a)
Right:
Valentina
Evening gown, late 1930s
Taupe wool crêpe
Gift of Estate of Lillian Gish, 1995
(1995.28.17)

The stylish eroticism of the 1930s was décolletage at the back, exposing the nape of the neck and the spine. Even a keyhole view to the spine is plausible when clothing's body is natural and the supports of corsetry and brassiere are not required. The back could not have been exposed previously, as long as the body was sustaining under-support in the round.

Isaac Mizrahi
Evening gown, fall/winter 1990-91
Bois-de-rose seed-bead embroidered silk chiffon
Courtesy Isaac Mizrahi

Mizrahi touches on exposure of the back with an additional energy, revealing an erotic frontier of posterior cleavage. Inspired by dresses of the 1930s and the Hollywood glamour of that era, Mizrahi achieves similar magnetism and bombshell effects in the nineties.

Madeleine Vionnet
Evening gown, summer 1932
Off-white silk chiffon with rhinestone embroidery
Gift of Madame Madeleine Vionnet, 1952
(CI 52.18.8ab)

As Far Eastern and Middle Eastern dress increasingly influenced Western fashion in the twentieth century, zones of exposure were gleaned from those cultures. The West has traditionally covered the middle section and bared from the margins, but Vionnet's daring dress of 1932 exposes the midriff.

Yves Saint Laurent
Cocktail dress, ca. 1964
Black silk cloqué with black grosgrain-ribbon binding
Gift of Jane Holzer, 1977 (1977.115.17ab)

Saint Laurent's strategic cutaways accommodate the keen new body interest of the 1960s with the cut and proportion of the couture. Versatile in his sourcing of fashion ideas, Saint Laurent may have been inspired by swimwear, especially the crab-back swimsuits of the 1930s, in his design for this cocktail dress.

Stephen Burrows
Dress, ca. 1971-72
Electric-blue rayon jersey with red merrowed trim
Gift of Muriel Kallis Newman, 1987 (1987.136.20)

Stimulated by Pop Art's graphic boldness, Burrows here discards his customary appliqué and creates a window to the body. Combining a sense of patchwork and varied pattern that plainly reveals merrowed edges, Burrows combines his Pop geometry with the era's proud body consciousness.

Chronology

Late 1770s-early 1780s: ankle-length hemlines

1785: bare breasts visible through sheer mull fichus or peeking above ruffle-edged necklines

1800-1815: Empire waist with low-cut neckline emphasizes the bosom; lightweight and sheer materials reveal the outline of the wearer's hips and legs; intermittent exposure of the ankle

1827-1833: necklines widen to reveal an expanse of shoulder; skirts balloon and rise to above the ankle

1850s-1860s: off-the-shoulder necklines; the back is visible to the mid-shoulder blade

1883: a revival of the eighteenth-century *à la polonaise* style shows the ankle

1910-1913: an expanse of the *poitrine* is exposed, with a lowered, unsupported bust; the back is revealed to the lower shoulder blade

1916: above-the-ankle skirts

1920s: hemlines rise to just below the knee; instances of deep-dipping front and back necklines

1930s: backs bared to the waist; Mainbocher does a strapless; midriff exposure

1947, post-New Look: strapless gowns; plunging necklines; bare midriffs

1964: Rudi Gernreich's Topless bathing suit

1965: Mary Quant and André Courrèges mini-skirts two to three inches above the knee

Late 1960s: microminis; hot pants; peekaboo dresses with apertures (André Courrèges, Pierre Cardin, Rudi Gernreich); transparent tops (Yves Saint Laurent)

1970s: braless plunging necklines

1990s: bared midriffs; transparency; back exposure; full-leg exposure

French lady, appeared in public in a dress entirely à la guillotine. That is to say . . . covered with a slight transparent gauze; the breasts entirely bare, as well as the arms up as high as the shoulders. . . . " *Gentleman's Magazine*, 1801 "Silk stockings made short skirts wearable." *Fortune*, January 1932 "In Defence of Sh**ld*rs" *Punch*, 1920s "Sweet hearting matches are very often made up at these parties. It's quite disgusting to a modest eye to see the way the young ladies dress to attract the notice of the gentlemen. They are nearly naked to the waist, only just a little bit of dress hanging on the shoulder, the breasts are quite exposed except a little bit coming up to hide the nipples." William Taylor, 1837 "The greatest provocation of lust comes from our apparel." Robert Burton, *Anatomy of Melancholy*, 1651 "The fashionable woman has long legs and aristocratic ankles but no knees. She has thin, veiled arms and fluttering hands but no elbows." Kennedy Fraser, *The Fashionable Mind*, 1981 "A lady's leg is a dangerous sight, in whatever colour it appears; but, when it is enclosed in white, it makes an irresistible attack upon us." *The Universal Spectator*, 1737 " 'Miladi' very handsome woman, but she and all the women were décolletées in a beastly fashion—damn the aristocratic standard of fashion; nothing will ever make me think it right or decent that I should see a lady's armpit flesh-folds when I am speaking to her." Georges Du Maurier, 1862 "I would need the pen of Carlyle to describe adequately the sensation caused by the young lady who first trod the streets of New York in a skirt . . . that was actually three inches from the ground." Henry Collins Brown, 1896 "In olden days, a glimpse of stocking was looked on as something shocking, but now, heaven knows, anything goes." Cole Porter, *Anything Goes*, 1934 "She [Josephine Baker] was wearing a marvelous little black skirt and a little Vionnet shirt—no sleeves, no back, no front, just crossed bars on the bias." Diana Vreeland, 1960s "This is a backless age and there is no single smarter sunburn gesture than to have every low-backed costume cut on exactly the same lines, so that each one makes a perfect frame for a smooth brown back." British *Vogue*, July 1929 "Madame du V., a French lady, appeared in public in a dress entirely à la guillotine. That is to say . . . covered with a slight transparent gauze; the breasts entirely bare, as well as the arms up as high as the shoulders. . . . " *Gentleman's Magazine*, 1801 "Silk stockings made